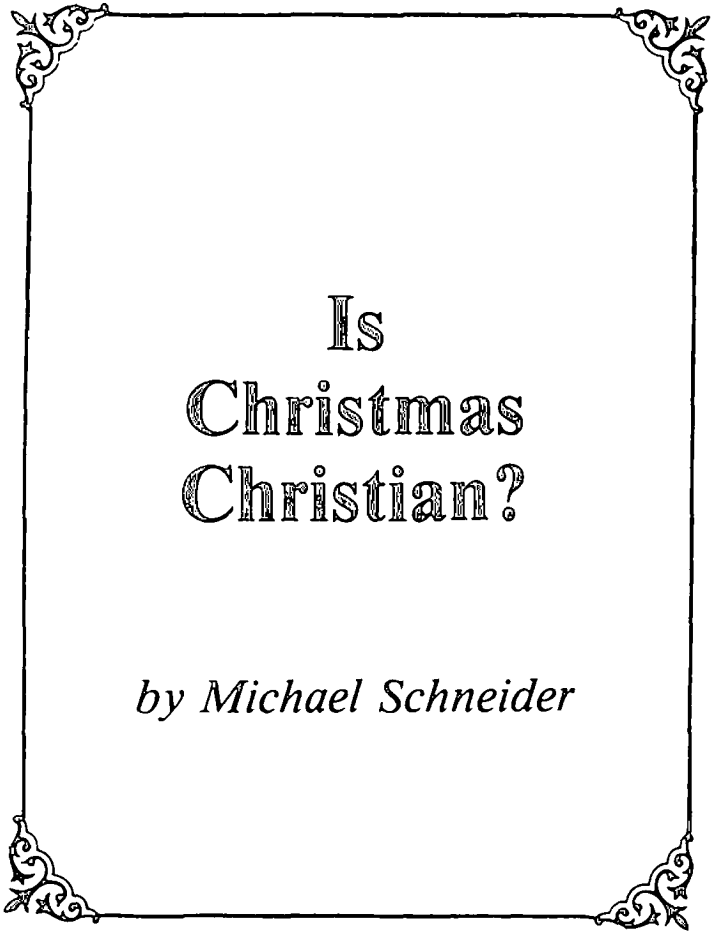
Is Christmas Christian?

by Michael Schneider



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IS CHRISTMAS CHRISTIAN?

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For the vast majority of people the question is really no question at all. Is Christmas Christian? "Of course it is! What could be more Christian than Christmas? Isn't it Jesus' birthday?" Others have begun to feel increasingly uncomfortable with the celebration of Christmas. When they look at the bacchanalia that takes place around December 25, there is an uneasy feeling that something is not quite right. And yet they keep telling themselves, "Isn't Christmas Jesus' birthday? The world has corrupted Christmas, but underneath it's still a wonderful holiday." And so they struggle year after year to "put Christ back into Christmas."

It may be a shocking thought to some, but after wrestling with the question for several years now, searching the Scriptures and church history, I have come to the conclusion that there is nothing Christian about Christmas; that in its present observance as well as in its origin, Christmas is basically and essentially pagan. If that thought is new and startling to you, I invite you to consider the possibility that for you Christmas is a blind spot that needs some re-examination.

I don't mean to say that I'm unimpressed with the sentimental appeal of the "holiday spirit." There's a certain charm about this season of the year — the thought of family gatherings, dreaming of a "White Christmas," "chestnuts roasting on an open fire," "city sidewalks, busy sidewalks, dressed in holiday style." No one with any sentimentality could escape a twinge of nostalgia when there's a feeling of Christmas in the air. Even the most hardened cynic can't stifle a softening childlike feeling of good will that lasts for a few days.

I've tried the approach that says, "Let's put Christ back into Christmas," but I have become more and more convinced that Christ doesn't *want* to be "put back into" Christmas. If we speak against the "commercialization" of Christmas and emphasize "the real meaning of Christmas," most people would readily agree. People are very well aware of what they consider to be the materialistic excesses of Christmas celebration, and they love sermons on the "true" meaning of Christmas. But I'm asking, "What *is* the *true* meaning of Christmas?" When you get right

down to its essence, what is "Christmas?" Where did it come from? How did it originate? What does it stand for now? The real question is the nature of the institution itself.

I think you will be shocked if you evaluate the institution of Christmas realistically. What I'm asking you to do is lay aside your cultural prejudices and preferences and approach this question with an open mind. Granted, that's hard to do. We are so snowed under a century of tradition and nostalgia that it's almost impossible for some people to look at the issue objectively at all. I'm asking you to put aside your preconceived notions, at least temporarily, to look honestly at this institution we call Christmas. Frankly, this article is calculated to disturb you, to make you think, and to cause you to change your actions if they are not consistent with the truth of the gospel.

I. ITS INCEPTION

What is the origin of Christmas? How did it begin? Were its beginnings pagan or Christian? There is no indication in the New Testament that the early Christians observed Christmas at all. It can be demonstrated in church history that for probably the first 300 years after the birth of Christ Christians knew nothing of Christmas celebration. It was only as the church began to drift from apostolic doctrine and practice into corruption that Christmas began.

Where did it come from? Where did the drifting Church get the ideas and customs associated with Christmas today? The source of most of the basic forms of paganism in the ancient world can be traced back to the Babylonian "mysteries." All of the ancient cultures, Egypt, Greece, Rome, even India and China, had beliefs, traditions, practices, gods and goddesses that were related to those found in Babylon. The names were different, and different modifications were added, but basically the ancient religions were related and find their "purest" form in Babylonia. In the Old Testament Babylon stands as the epitome of everything that is godless and perverse. The greatest indignation suffered by God's people for their sins is to be carried away into Babylonian captivity, into the heart of the heathen world.

In the New Testament "Babylon" becomes Rome. The Roman Empire embodies the pagan beliefs and practices of ancient Babylon and is seen as the arch-enemy of God's people. In the book or Revelation Rome is called "the great harlot who is seated upon many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the

dwellers of the earth have become drunk." She is "a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of blasphemous names, with seven heads and ten horns. The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and bedecked with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; and on her forehead was written a name of mystery: Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth's abominations." And John says that she was "drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus" (Rev. 17:1-6).

What was to be the attitude of God's people toward this "Babylon" of their day? "Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues" (Rev. 18:4). Of course they could not physically separate themselves from the Roman Empire where they lived. The call was to spiritual separation from its attitudes and practices. But, did God's people hear the warning and separate themselves from Babylon? No, they did the very opposite. They compromised with her and became contaminated with her corruption. In 313 A.D. the Roman Emperor Constantine supposedly adopted the Christian faith and declared it to be the official religion of his realm. His embracing the Christian Church proved detrimental to true Christianity. Constantine retained the traditional pagan titles, and his coins still bear the figures and names of the old Roman gods.

The Church became "the Roman Catholic Church" and its method became compromise with paganism. Ever since, the Roman Catholic way of converting pagans to its style of worship has been to absorb them gradually, along with their idolatrous observances. The church was content to swell the number of nominal adherents by meeting paganism halfway. There were some valiant voices of protest who bitterly lamented the inconsistency of this approach, but their voices were raised in vain.

The Roman Church has continued the same approach until this day. It can be seen particularly in Central and South America, where idols have simply been replaced with statues of the saints. Some of their names and tradition have even been combined. Roman Catholic Churches in these countries are often opened to the Indians for the worship of their animistic gods.

How then did we receive our "holidays" (holy days) with their customs and traditions, Christmas as well as Easter, Halloween, and Mardi Gras? Each of them has come to us from ancient Babylon, through Rome, through the Roman Catholic Church.

It was for this very reason that in Calvin's Geneva you could have been fined or imprisoned for celebrating Christmas. It was at

the request of the Westminster Assembly that the English Parliament in 1644 passed an act forbidding the observance of Christmas, calling it a heathen holiday. In an appendix to their "Directory for the Public Worship of God" the Westminster divines said: "There is no day commanded in Scripture to be kept holy under the gospel but the Lord's day, which is the Christian Sabbath. Festival-days vulgarly called 'Holy-days', having no warrant in the word of God, are not to be continued." (See also, James Bannerman, "The Church of Christ," Vol. 1, pages 406-420).

When the Puritans came to America they passed similar laws. The early New Englanders worked steadily through December 25, 1620, in "studied neglect" of the day. About 40 years later the General Court of Massachusetts decreed punishment for those who kept the season: "...anyone who is found observing, by abstinence from labor, feasting, or any other way, any such days as Christmas Day, shall pay for every such offense five shillings."

It was not until the 19th Century that Christmas had any religious significance in Protestant churches . . . .

What then is the history of Christmas? It came into the Church centuries after the New Testament, was discarded at the Reformation, and has only in this century crept back into the Protestant Church. What I'm saying, then, is that the "*real*" Christmas has always been pagan, and to make it a Christian celebration is to try to *add* Christ or Biblical elements to an essentially pagan holiday.

II. ITS INSTITUTIONS

Let's look, then, at some of the familiar customs of Christmas and examine their significance. I'm taking only a small selection of the many familiar traditions, but I assure you that what I say about these is true of all the Christmas customs, and I encourage you to check them all out in any secular encyclopedia.

Take, for instance, the very date of Christmas, December 25. As you are probably aware, no one really knows the time of Christ's birth and December 25 is a highly unlikely time. Why then December 25? Well, at the time of year when the days began to lengthen again, the Babylonians celebrated the victory of their Sun god. The Roman copy of this Babylonian custom was called Saturnalia, the feast of the birth of Sol. It was for centuries an abomination to Christians. The celebration was an orgy of pagan revelry. But the Church, instead of standing firm against paganism,

began to compromise. It wanted to "help" weak young Christians who didn't want to give up the fun and merry making surrounding this winter solstice. So the Church said, "Go on with your fun and celebration. Only now we'll call it a celebration of the birth of the Son of God. Instead of losing people to paganism, we'll combine the two and gradually even win some of the pagans of our day to profess Christianity. Let's not force men to choose between the two."

Then think about the name "Christmas" itself. What does it mean? Many people do not even know that it is a combination of Christ and mass. Christmas is the Roman Catholic celebration of a particular mass in honor of the birth of Christ. Perhaps it would impress on our minds the "real" meaning of Christmas if we would refer to it as "Christmass." What is the significance of the mass? At its heart the Roman Catholic mass is a denial of the sufficiency of Christ's atonement. It professes to be a reenactment of the sacrifice of Christ for sin. It is a denial of the Gospel (Heb. 9:12, 24-26; 10:10, 12, 14). The Roman Catholic Church has many other masses, such as "Michaelmass," but it is their "Christmass" that Protestants have singled out for observance.

What could seem more harmless than the beautiful Christmas trees that light our homes during the Christmas season? But do you know why we have trees in our homes? From ancient times trees have played an important role in pagan religion and were even worshipped. Norsemen, Celts and Saxons used trees to ward off witches, evil spirits, and ghosts. In Egypt the palm tree was prominent; in Rome it was the fir. Because of this association, idols were often carefully carved from trees. Jeremiah warned the Old Testament people of God: "Thus says the Lord: 'Learn not the way of the nations, nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens because the nations are dismayed at them, for the customs of the peoples are false. A tree from the forest is cut down, and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman. Men deck it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move" (Jer. 10:2-4).

Even the nativity scene, which some regard as the most "Christian" symbol of Christmas, is tainted with pagan influence. Nearly every recorded form of pagan worship which has descended from Babylonian "mysteries" focuses the attention of the worshipper on a mother goddess and the birth of her child. Different cultures used different names, but the concept is uniformly the same. In Babylon it was the worship of the queen of heaven and her son Tammuz, the sun god who was thought to be

the incarnation of the sun. The birth of the sun god took place at the winter Solstice. "Yule" was the Babylonian name for child or infant, and "Yule Day" was celebrated on December 25, long before Christ's birth. The next time you see a manger scene on a Christmas card, and Mary and Jesus have a halo around their heads, remember that this Roman Catholic concept is borrowed from the Babylonian "mysteries". And remember that the believer is forbidden to make for himself "any graven image or any likeness of anything that is in the heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Exodus 20:4). Do we take these commands of God seriously, or have we long since outgrown them and explained them away?

Or what about "Santa Claus"? Can anyone seriously deny that he represents the "real" meaning of Christmas for the vast majority of Americans? I won't go into the familiar stories of his origin as a Roman Catholic saint, but what does he stand for today? Is he a harmless, jolly, fat elf, or has he become an anti-Christian symbol of greed, materialism, selfishness — an expression of "something for nothing"? "What's in it for me?"

Parents who tell their children the Santa Claus myth are endangering their credibility with their children. When they ask you, "Can Santa really see me through these walls?" — what do you reply? Our children ought to be able to know that they can trust everything we tell them without question. How else can we expect them to believe us when we tell them "the old, old story of unseen things above, of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love?"

Everything the modern American pagan believes about God is capsuled in Santa Claus. He is busily engaged in a nice though rather meaningless activity most of the year. He exists somewhere up north as a harmless, friendly old man with a long white beard. He visits his people once a year, spending the other 364 days in obscurity. A child may write him at the North Pole, but the communication is strictly one way; Santa is not involved with daily living. The way for a child to be acceptable in Santa's sight is to be "good." Santa warns of the consequences of being "bad," but his word really can't be trusted. The child knows he has not been perfect, and even though he may feel some anxiety, he remembers last year and knows that no matter what Santa says or what the child does, in the end Santa will reward him. Santa represents a god who threatens man with hell and judgment only to keep him in line in this life, but who will accept all men in one way or another in the end. If you teach your children the Santa Claus myth, you are unknowingly giving them the material to build an un-biblical

concept of the Transcendent.

Isn't it interesting that the Japanese have raised Santa Claus to the rank of a deity and given him an equal place among the seven popular gods of good luck? No wonder that a liberal Protestant churchman recently suggested that St. Nicholas could well be the first truly ecumenical saint. He said that both the average pagan and the ordinary Roman Catholic, as well as the Protestant, would applaud the move: "Even the Buddhists and Moslems who revere the old fellow, might take a long stride along the ecumenical way with us...He has done more to spread the teaching that 'It's better to give than to receive,' than any churchman of the past thousand years." That says it all!

But isn't the giving of gifts a lovely way to remember the birth of our Lord? Surely there is nothing un-Christian about giving to one another. But has any other aspect of Christmas become more perverted than this? "We spend money we don't have to buy gifts they don't need to impress people we don't like." What a mockery and a madness the shopping whirl has become. Could anyone seriously suggest that what goes on in America around December 25th is honoring to Jesus Christ, the One who lived a life of simplicity, humility and self-denial, who condemned ostentation and self-indulgence, who taught us that "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of things which he possesses" (Luke 12:15)? Yet people who claim to be Christians spend hundreds and even thousands of dollars on their Christmasses and at the same time give little for the work of the gospel in our land or in the needy mission field. Isn't true Christian giving something that should take place the year round, out of a true heart of love, and not from compulsion and with an expectation to receive in return?

What about the parties and revelries and debauchery that take place at this time of year, supposedly in connection with the birth of Jesus Christ. Why is it that liquor flows more freely at this time of year than any other? Why is it that there are more automobile accidents during the "holiday season" than at any other time? We may quibble about the origins of the Christmas tree and manger scene, but one thing is certain: If you use the Incarnation of our Lord as an excuse for revelry and debauchery, you can be sure that you will reap the judgment of God. Now, the question is this: is all of this travesty surrounding the Christmas season *inconsistent* with the "true" meaning of Christmas, or *is* this the "true" meaning of Christmas derived from its origin and history?

But aren't the traditions surrounding Christmas really harmless?

Aren't they innocent enough? Well, are they? How does Satan most effectively tempt us? Does he set before us horrible, grotesque-looking things that repulse us? Does he jump out of a dark alley in a red suit with a tail, and wave a pitch-fork and say, "I'm the devil. I've come to deceive you, to bring you down to hell?" Of course not. The devices of Satan are subtle: he "disguises himself as an angel of light" (II Cor. 11:14). He sets before us things that seem "harmless," "innocent," "fun" — things that "everyone else is doing." Sincere Christians are often unwittingly led into idolatry through man's traditions.

III. ITS IMPLICATIONS

From this mass of material (and we've only scratched the surface), let's draw some conclusions. How is the Christian to react to the Christ-mass and all its traditions? As I see it, we have only three alternatives:

1. *We can keep on trying our best to "Put Christ back in Christmas,"* keep on fighting the losing battle to salvage something remotely Christian from this thoroughly pagan holiday. But then we must ask ourselves, "Am I 'putting Christ' in a pagan celebration?" We must deal with the basic question, What *is* "Christmas?" What is it really? Where did it start and what has it historically been?

2. *We can try to separate Christmas entirely from Christ.* We can observe it as kind of cultural folk festival, reasoning that the pagan elements are so far removed historically that the traditions have been somehow purged from their idolatry. That would be more consistent, but there is still a problem: Your non-Christian friends and society still vaguely associate Christmas with the birth of Christ and assume that since you're a Christian you are joining in this celebration of Jesus' birth. Christians in primitive cultures have had this problem for years. They are urged to participate in pagan rites as a kind of cultural heritage, disassociating themselves from their idolatrous origins. But can they do that and still maintain a consistent Christian witness?

3. *The only other alternative is to forsake Christmas entirely.* I'm convinced that for myself, this is the only consistent course to take. I know well the objections. I've heard them many times. "No one is completely consistent." No, of course no one is completely consistent. But that fact doesn't relieve us of the obligation to be as consistent as we *can* be; to obey every Scriptural command that we understand. "But is that a *drastic* step?" Yes, it's a very drastic

step; but if we are going to stem the tide of paganism in our day — or even challenge it — drastic measures are going to be necessary. "Isn't that a *radical* proposal?" Yes, but then true Christianity is a radical faith.

"But wouldn't I be considered *fanatical* if I took such a drastic measure?" Probably. *That* would be a new experience, wouldn't it? No one enjoys being considered a fanatic — if they do there's something wrong. No one enjoys persecution. But think how little persecution we face as Christians. Isn't it because we are inconsistent? Isn't there something wrong when our beliefs and practice don't disturb the world any more than they do? If we compromise at this point, why wouldn't we compromise at another, and another, and another? We Christians often wonder why we are not persecuted today. The conclusion we often reach is that we would be persecuted if we were faithful. Why doesn't the world hate us? Isn't it because we are not challenging the world's thinking at the most crucial point — the world's concept of what Christianity is? The world has substituted a folk religion for the gospel.

Martin Luther said:

"If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battle field besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point."

"Wouldn't that be a very *hard* thing to do?" Yes, it would. No question about it. The Christmas tradition is so firmly entrenched in our society — and even in our own hearts — that it would be most difficult to swim against the stream. But the question is not really, "Is it hard?" but "Is it right?" The right thing is not always easy. Christ has never promised us that following him would be easy. When our Christian lives are as easy as ours are, there is bound to be something wrong somewhere.

What then are the positive reasons we should consider scrapping Christmas altogether? The first is the reason our Protestant forefathers so carefully avoided Christmas: It was because they held the Scriptures to be the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice. One confession says, "The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deducted from

Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men." (*Westminster Confession,* 1. 6). "The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or under the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture" (XXIII. 1). Jesus said to the Pharisees, "For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, ...making the Word of God of none effect through your tradition..." (Mark 7:8,13). Paul wrote to the Galatians in dismay, "Ye observe days, and months and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain" (Gal. 4:10-11). He wasn't condemning them for observing those institutions commanded by God, but for observing those of man's making, contrary to God's law.

Do you think I *enjoy* saying these things? No one enjoys being an Ebeneezer Scrooge or the Grinch who stole Christmas. But the only real question is this: Is what I've been saying Biblical? Is it consistent with God's Word? If it's not, then you ought to disregard it. But if it is, then you ought to consider it carefully and heed it. You may, of course, disagree with my interpretation of Scripture at this point; you may disagree with my assessment of the historical background and the present situation. I could be wrong. I very often am. But what you *must* do with a message like this is what the Berean Christians did with Paul's preaching: "they searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so" (Acts 17:11). You must openly, honestly, and realistically evaluate the evidence for yourself and come to your own conclusions. You are not responsible to the preacher — but to God.

The Scriptures point out what is to be a stark contrast between the Christian and the world. That contrast has been largely glossed over in our day. "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (I John 2:15). "Come out from among them, and be ye separate" (II Cor. 6:17). "And be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Rom. 12:2). Or, as it could be translated: "Do not live according to the fashions of the times; you must not adopt the customs of this world; do not imitate the way this world lives; don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold." The idea is, don't let

the world write the agenda, don't let the world call the shots or set the standard. The Christian is *in* the world, but he must not be *of* the world. He is a citizen of another country, a stranger and pilgrim here. He isn't keeping pace with his companions because he hears a different drummer.

What I'm really questioning is whether you *can* have a "Christian" Christmas. The "religious" aspects are the worst part of Christmas. There is no more pointed illustration of Christmas than the contrast between cultural religion and Biblical faith. Christmas promotes an "imitation gospel" that actually keeps the world from understanding the true Gospel. Christmas presents a substitute gospel that the world can easily live with. To the world, the Christian message is simply "love, peace, the spirit of giving, the feeling of good will." That stripped-down "gospel" gives men just enough innoculation to keep them from understanding the true Gospel.

The world *loves* Christmas because Christmas promotes a sentimental picture of a baby in a manger. Christmas keeps Jesus a baby in the manger. Jesus is misrepresented by Christmas. The Gospel is misrepresented by Christmas. Christmas is the one time an ungodly person can be religious safely. Most people like to do something religious every once in a while to ease their conscience and convince themselves that they are really a pretty good person after all; and Christmas affords them the perfect opportunity to do that. It's perfectly safe for the most pagan person to join in the Christmas spirit. You can have the Christmas spirit without having the Holy Spirit, without having the mind of Christ.

The very popularity of Christmas should cause the Christian to question it. Anyone and everyone can celebrate Christmas without question! Outright pagans, nominal Christians, even Buddhists join in the celebration. If in reality December 25 was a date set by God to remember the birth of Jesus, you can be very sure that the world would have nothing to do with it. After all, God *has* commanded the observance of one day in seven, a day when Christians celebrate the resurrection of Christ, the first day of the week, the Lord's day — but does the world observe it? Of course not. The world totally disregards it. Shouldn't the Christian be suspicious of a celebration in which the whole sinful world can join without qualms? There are multitudes of people who continually desecrate the Lord's Day, but somehow have great zeal about being in Church at Christmas.

The crucial question for the believer is the Lordship of Christ:

"You are not your own, you were bought with a price" (I Cor. 6:19-20). Are you sincerely willing to think whatever God would have you think about this whole matter? Are you willing to do whatever God would have you do, even though it may mean a drastic change in your thinking or practice? It's at this point that the conflict really comes. I have heard many people say about this subject, "No I don't want to read a book about it. No I don't want to think about it. I don't want to talk about it. I'm going to have my Christmas no matter what. I enjoy it, and no one is going to take it away from me" (the implication being, not even God). It's then that Christmas becomes an idol. An idol is anything that comes between you and God. Anything you refuse to give up, even at his command. General exhortations to "surrender all" don't affect us greatly; but discipleship really counts when it affects some concrete area we really care about. The real question is, can you sincerely say to God about this issue, "Have Thine own way, Lord; have thine own way. Thou art the potter, I am the clay. Mold me and make me after Thy will, While I am waiting, yielded and still"?

CHRISTMAS SUPERSTITIOUS

We have no superstitious regard for times and seasons. Certainly we do not believe in the present ecclesiastical arrangement called *Christmas*. First, because we do not believe in the *mass* at all, but abhor it, whether it be sung in Latin or in English. Secondly, because we find no Scriptural warrant whatever for observing any day as the birthday of the Savior; and consequently, its observance is a superstition, because not of divine authority. Superstition has fixed most positively the day of our Savior's birth, although there is no possibility of discovering when it occurred....It was not till middle of the third century that any part of the Church celebrated the nativity of our Lord; and it was not till very long after the Western Church had set the example, that the Eastern adopted it....Probably the fact is that the "holy" days were arranged to fit in with the heathen festivals. We venture to assert, that if there be any day in the year, of which we may be pretty sure that it was not the day on which the Savior was born, it is the 25th of December....Regarding not the day, let us, nevertheless, give God thanks for the gift of His dear Son.

— C.H. Spurgeon (Dec. 24, 1871)

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